

Very Rev. Fr. Patrick Courtney, Provincial of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart; Rev. Fathers, Ladies and Gentlemen.

On the occasion of the centenary of the arrival of the first Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Cork – your first base in Ireland – I am honoured to host this reception in City Hall in recognition of the great contribution your Society has made over one hundred years to the religious, educational, and social fabric of our City and our country.

Of course there's a small connection between the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and the Lord Mayor of Cork. When Cork native, Fr. Michael Tierney, established your house at Western Road in 1909 it was in Dyke House - which previously had been a summer house of the Lord Mayor ... a fact not so well known.

Studying your website I learned that whilst it was a desire of your founder, Fr. Chevalier, to establish a house in Ireland it didn't happen until the young and visionary Fr. Tierney came on the scene.

There's a lot of talk today about the quality of leadership in all spheres of life ranging from politics to business to sport and to the Catholic Church. When we consider Ireland in the early 1900's – and particularly the peasant rural Ireland – it is only then that we can understand the enormity of the task and the great leadership qualities shown by Fr. Tierney. First of all learning about Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in France, going there to join the Society, moving to Australia where he made an enormous contribution to the Society and eventually coming back to establish a base in Ireland.

This evening let us pay tribute to his leadership and to his vision. Those leadership qualities were to be repeated many times by his successors.

Since those early beginnings the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart have made an enormous contribution to the life of the Catholic Church in Ireland and particularly here in Cork.

Sacred Heart College at Western Road and later at Carrignavar has been a centre of education and spiritual development since 1909. Over the decades it produced fine young men who had the spiritual calling to priesthood. Many of these ventured into distant lands to spread the Gospel message. Places like Papua New Guinea where, apart from the problems of diverse languages, strange foods, disease and poor medical services, there were huge ethnic and cultural problems to be overcome.

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart were pioneer missionaries in that difficult terrain where, in addition to their pastoral services, they helped in providing educational and medical services for the natives. Later your men ventured to apartheid South Africa, to Indonesia, to Venezuela, and more recently to Russia – all very difficult territories with physical difficulties and dangers. I know that some of your members paid a very high price for their great dedication in terms of ill health, and unfortunately a few paid the ultimate price with their lives during World War II.

This evening we remember and pay tribute to all those great men of whom you can be justifiably proud in this centenary year.

We also pay tribute to those Missionaries of the Sacred Heart who have undertaken a broad range of ministries at home, as well as in England and the USA, in parish and retreat ministry; teaching, hospital and prison chaplaincy; addiction and other counselling; spiritual direction, conducting parish missions and retreats.

On the wider "Society" front, your Irish base has also contributed significantly through the leadership of Fr. Michael Curran who was elected for twelve years as the first Irish-born Superior General of the MSC Society covering over 50 countries with 2,000 priests and brothers, and I'm happy that he is with us this evening. Leadership has not been scarce within your Society, and I applaud you for it.

Thankfully, the Irish people have always responded very generously to you with donations. Without their donations you wouldn't have been able to fund the many initiatives and missions you have undertaken from this city.

The level of encouragement your Mission Support Centre at Western Road receives from every corner of Ireland is impressive, and it is my hope that this spirit of generosity and support will continue to flourish, passing onto new generations as it has done in the past.

Irish missionaries abroad have been great ambassadors for our country. Long before Ireland established its diplomatic service our missionaries were pioneer ambassadors. Long before NGO's were established and sent aid workers to developing countries our missionaries were providing aid to the poor, building schools, hospitals, clinics, providing training and skills, creating infrastructure, and developing communities based on the Irish parish model. Even in the early days they lived amongst their adopted people, They knew the people, and they were well placed to identify with them and their needs. They left their families in Ireland and devoted their lives to their adopted people in a rare example of supreme generosity to our fellow man.

Irish missionaries see their vocation primarily to evangelise. In the humanitarian and development work that they undertake they recognise and appreciate the importance of the spiritual dimension that the peoples of Africa, in particular, long for in their lives. It is that recognition that sets missionaries apart from all other development and aid workers. They practice a holistic approach rather than the narrower dimension of just providing material support, important and all as that is. They know that you cannot develop a community unless you also understand the spiritual needs of the individuals in that community. Missionaries attend to this in a seamless manner making them so welcome and so appreciated by the people to whom they are helping in so many ways.

It is right and proper that the Government through Irish Aid supports this great work with a special funding scheme. Often their material support, for example, in the HIV / AIDS pandemic in Africa – might seem like a drop in the ocean, but it is the inspiration and hope, they give that adds value to the lives of these people.

The message of the gospel is a message of hope. Above all else Irish missionaries bring hope to the people to whom they minister. A glance at some of the images on your website displays that hope in the eyes and in the faces of the people in need to whom your priests and brothers minister.

A centenary is not only a time for reflecting on and celebrating past achievements, but importantly it is a time to anticipate, for vision, and to plan for the future. In this respect, I am aware that you have been pro-active. For many years you have attached great importance to promoting partnership and co-operation with laity in your various ministries at home and overseas. Thus, you are acknowledging that the Church – comprising of priests and laity together – continues the mission of Christ in our time.

I recognise that the decline in vocations makes it difficult for you to plan for your next centenary. I understand that the current trend is for more vocations to emerge in the southern hemisphere, where you are doing very well. That's good, but I think all of us would like to see more vocations in Ireland to serve the Irish Church and the missions at home and abroad. As one travels along Western Road one cannot miss your advertising boards inviting vocations.

As Lord Mayor of Cork I am delighted that you could come here this evening to allow me to pay public tribute to you and to your predecessors, for your work and for your contribution to the life of the city and much further afield.

I wish your celebrations and your reflections every success throughout your centenary year, and may your next 100 years be as fruitful as this one you are celebrating during 2009.

Cllr. Brian Bermingham  
Lord Mayor of Cork City